Introduction

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The Road to Peterloo

On 16 August 1819, a mass meeting for parliamentary reform at St. Peter's Field in Manchester, attended by men, women and children from local weaving villages such as Oldham, Middleton, Bury, Burnley, Stockport, Saddleworth and Royton, was brutally suppressed by the local yeomanry cavalry at the behest of town magistrates. The 'Peterloo Massacre', as it became known, was the hiatus of a period of tension which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars and which saw the resurgence of radical activism which had been stifled in the mid-1790s as Britain became embroiled in counter-revolutionary and later imperial war with France. The period after 1815, as the country readjusted to peace, was characterised by strain between those in authority–be it local magistrates and officials or the ministers of Lord Liverpool's Tory government, many of whom were part of the landed aristocracy and exercised both economic and political power–and those from across the population at large who remained wholly excluded from the political process and thus without formal means to alleviate their economic distress.[1]

'Mass platform' meetings were held over the course of 1815-19 as part of a renewed campaign of action in favour of parliamentary reform which emerged in peacetime and which garnered support among working people suffering from the post-war economic downturn. As British people struggled to find work and feed their families, with the price of bread kept

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[1] For a full account of the massacre, see Poole, Robert, *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

high through the application of punitive import duties on corn, calls for universal suffrage, representation for the growing industrial towns and an end to parliamentary corruption gained widespread currency among those who believed such reform would go some way to remedying the social and economic ills they laboured under. People gathered in outdoor spaces in towns across the North-West of England, in Scotland, London and the East Midlands to listen to local campaigners as well as speakers such as Henry Hunt, who gained a reputation as an inspiring orator and figurehead of the movement for parliamentary reform.[2] Clubs and societies also proliferated, under the auspices of veteran reformer Major John Cartwright, and in March 1817 people from the north tried to march to London to present a petition for parliamentary reform only to be turned back before they reached their destination. Calls for an end to parliamentary corruption and a redistribution of political power were also disseminated in the radical press, in cheap prints such as Thomas Wooler's *Black Dwarf* and William Cobbett's *Weekly Political Register* which became popular in the era.[3]

While some divergence did exist within radical circles as to the best way to achieve political redress, the majority of campaigners favoured a 'constitutional' strategy. There were however some figures within the movement who became convinced that more violent means of action were required to effectuate an overhaul of the prevailing system of government and end the social and economic distress of the poor. Some of these 'ultras' who gathered in the capital under the name of the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, after the death of land reformer Thomas Spence in 1814, became more and more virulent in their calls for radical change, and the means to bring this about, alerting spies in their midst to what appeared to be their subversive plans to challenge established authority.[4] Riots occurred at a reform gathering in Spa Fields in London in late 1816 and an armed rising took place in June 1817 near Nottingham. The latter, known as the Pentrich

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[2] See Belchem, John, *'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1985).

[3] This period of radical activity is given particular attention by Katrina Navickas in her book *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

[4] The second lecture in a series entitled 'Robert Wedderburn's Insurrectionary British Atlantic,' delivered by Ryan Hanley on 27 April 2022 at the Hutchins Centre at Harvard University, sheds light on the increasingly militant posture adopted by a radical of mixed-race Jamaican and Scottish background, Robert Wedderburn, on issues such as slavery and personal and political liberty at his chapel in Soho. See https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/event/ryan-hanley-2.

rising, led to the execution or transportation of those considered the ringleaders, despite the fact that it was widely recognised that their actions were in large part incited by a ministerial spy who convinced the participants that a national insurrection would ensue.

Lord Liverpool's ministry reacted to the proliferation of radical initiatives and the threat to order they appeared to pose with repressive measures. Habeas corpus, the centuries-old right not to be imprisoned without trial, was suspended in early 1817 and the right to free assembly was restricted in the Seditious Meetings Act of the same year after the government argued that schemes were afoot across the country by subversive plotters intent on whipping up popular discontent. During the debate on the third reading of the draft Bill in the House of Commons on 14 March 1817, Tory minister George Canning warned his fellow MPs that "in the peculiar circumstances of the country, there is an unusual degree of inflammability in the public mind;—[…] there are incendiaries abroad who would avail themselves of this extraordinary inflammability to kindle the fires of rebellion in every corner of the kingdom."[5] Addressing the chamber during the same debate, Kirkman Finlay, a merchant and Tory MP for Glasgow, spoke out in favour of the proposed restrictions on liberty of assembly in the interests of stifling popular unrest. He stated that he

> was deeply convinced of the necessity and propriety of the measures proposed by ministers, when he considered the great mischief which the meetings lately held in the country had produced. The country had a right to expect that ministers should take some effectual measures at a crisis so important as the present, and they had accordingly taken these measures. Unwilling as he or any British subject must be to relinquish any part of that glorious liberty which had been transmitted to us by our memorable ancestors, he still thought it was much better to give up for a time a share of that liberty, than run the danger of losing all. He would rather trust his majesty's ministers with the liberties of the people than he would trust those who were endeavouring to set the country in a flame.[6]

Nevertheless, despite heightened ministerial anxiety in the face of mass protest, the prevalence of ultra-radical, insurrectionary tendencies within the reform movement was relatively low. Although wider sympathy with more

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[5] George Canning MP, House of Commons debate, 14 March 1817, Hansard vol. 35 cc. 1119.

[6] Kirkman Finlay MP, House of Commons debate, 14 March 1817, Hansard vol. 35 cc. 1096. The Bill passed the third reading by 135 votes to 44.

militant strategies may have spread after the repression of Peterloo, the vast majority of those who organised and attended mass gatherings sought meaningful change using peaceful methods.[7] Most leaders were very careful to avoid association with those who contemplated more violent means, and sought to ensure that demonstrations and meetings were pacific occasions and met with the necessary stamp of legality.

Spies in the pay of the Home Office, however, contributed to raising concern within local and national government about the likelihood of an armed uprising at such events and contributed to generating the degree of alarm which would ultimately lead to the violent repression of Peterloo. Reports of armed drilling and military practice on the moors outside Manchester in the run-up to the St. Peter's Field meeting, of bludgeons, stones and pikes being carried on the day by protestors arranged in disciplined battalions, playing drums and holding aloft banners, reignited fear–prevalent since the French Revolution and galvanised by the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the 'Luddite' protests of the 1810s–of popular mass revolt. Such fear, mingled with "class hatred" (in E. P. Thompson's words) and a conviction that the demonstrators were "in a posture of war […] armed and arrayed in a warlike manner," induced the authorities to take measures to prepare for, carry out and subsequently justify armed repression of the people gathered at the Manchester meeting.[8]

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[7] Jason McElligott argues that two relatively well-known radical journalists, Thomas Wooler of the *Black Dwarf*, and William Hone, were increasingly swayed by ultra-radical arguments in the wake of Peterloo. McElligott argues, based on evidence in "a recently discovered note" from Wooler to Hone, that both men may have been ready to lend their support to the ultra-radicals who plotted to assassinate the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet in February 1820, had their conspiracy been successful. See McElligott, Jason, "'The Men They Couldn't Hang': 'Sensible' Radicals and the Cato Street Conspiracy," Jason McElligott, Martin Conboy eds., *The Cato Street Conspiracy: Plotting, Counter-Intelligence and the Revolutionary Tradition in Britain and Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 49-63.

[8] Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin Books, 1991 [1963]) 752. Thompson suggested that the particular brutality of the yeomanry cavalry was the result of "the panic of class hatred" among the middle-class "manufacturers, merchants publicans, and shopkeepers" who made up the force. He went on to argue that "There is no term for this but class war. But it was a pitifully one-sided war." Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class,* 753. Carlisle Archive Centre D/LONS/L/2/67. William Lowther, 1st Earl of Lonsdale, though not a witness to the events and his estate 100 miles from the site of the massacre, kept a detailed personal notebook entitled 'Manchester' during the latter months of 1819 in

Massacre at St. Peter's Field

Monday 16 August 1819 was a sunny day in Lancashire. People in the surrounding weaving villages had been preparing for a long time for the procession–initially planned for the previous week–into town on their customary day-off. It was to be a family outing as well as a chance to gather in numbers to listen to those speakers who were spearheading the cause of radical political reform and lend support to those claims. Women, some of whom had founded their own female reform societies in early summer, had embroidered flags and banners with evocative slogans such as 'Unity and Strength' and 'Liberty and Fraternity' which expressed their desire for change, and their determination to militate for it.[9] Marchers arrived early on the morning of the demonstration, dressed and ready for the walk into town. Men came in caps, some of which were stitched with words such as 'libertas', and women, dressed in white, carried sprigs of laurel. Local reform leaders made sure that those who joined the procession were aware of the importance of defying the expectations of their detractors, who saw them as "a mob-like rabble", by exuding "a steadiness and seriousness

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which he pasted various newspaper clippings and wrote brief observations on the debates which followed, in particular on the supposed illegal nature of the meeting and on the rightful conduct of the cavalry. Given his position as a Tory landowner and former MP in an area of the country where radicalism was strong and an uprising feared, it is of no surprise to find that he considered the meeting unlawful and the yeomanry cavalry acting in the capacity of "citizen soldiers" justified in "preventing a breach of the peace."

[9] Samuel Bamford lists some of the slogans in his account of the day's events, first published in 1844, which constitutes an important source for historians and which Fabrice Bensimon discusses in this volume. See Bamford, Samuel, *Passages in the Life of a Radical* vol. 1 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 146. Slogans such as 'Strength and Unity' were cited by the prosecution in the later trial of the meeting organisers as evidence of their seditious intentions. For an account of women's involvement in radical politics and in the St. Peter's Field demonstration see Bush, M. L., "The Women at Peterloo: The Impact of Female Reform on the Manchester Meeting of 16 August 1819," *History* 89, 2 (April 2004): 209-232 and Mather, Ruth, "'These Lancashire women are witches in politics': Female reform societies and the theatre of radicalism, 1819-1820," *Return to Peterloo,* Poole, Robert ed. (Manchester: Manchester Region History Review 23, 2014), 49-64. On the material culture of Peterloo, see Roberts, Matthew, "Radical Banners from Peterloo to Chartism," Poole ed., *Return to Peterloo*, 93-109.

befitting the occasion."[10] They were also advised not to put up a struggle if they were faced with officers of the peace.

Although the exact numbers are not known, historians suggest that around 60,000 people, if not more, went to the rally at St. Peter's Field that day. Women's reform clubs had a prominent place in the proceedings, and some were gathered close to the hustings where the speakers were due to address the crowd. Yet the brimming anxiety of the local magistrates, gathered together in a building overlooking the field, and their determination to stifle the growing mass movement, led to the decision to hastily read the Riot Act from an upstairs window before sending armed cavalry and constables through the crowd to arrest those giving or due to give speeches. It is now estimated, thanks to the efforts of scholars scouring the relief books and claims for compensation filed after the brutal clearing of the field, that between fifteen and nineteen people lost their lives at or after Peterloo, and between 600 and 700 were injured, many horrifically.[11]

Despite public outcry and press criticism of the way in which the protestors were dispersed, the military repression was largely vindicated in the courts and in ministerial communication in the immediate aftermath of what very quickly became known as 'Peterloo'. The Prince Regent, future King George IV, congratulated the Manchester magistrates for "their prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for the preservation of the public tranquillity," backed by the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth.[12] A repressive set of laws–the Six Acts–was introduced in December 1819 to further restrict the right to public assembly and military drilling in the wake of the events at Manchester and the main organisers of the meeting were charged with "conspiracy, to alter the law by force and threats; and for convening and attending an illegal, riotous, and tumultuous meeting at Manchester, on Monday the 16th of August, 1819" and were brought to trial at York in

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[10] Bamford, *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 146. Bamford, who led the procession from Middleton, describes at length in his autobiographical account the measures undertaken at the outset to ensure the marchers arrived in Manchester in a peaceful manner.

[11] The names of those in attendance at St. Peter's Field on 16 August 1819 are available for viewing on the website of the Peterloo Memorial Campaign along with their address, occupation and role in the events: http://www.peterloomassacre.org/names.html.

[12] Carlisle Archive Centre D/LONS/L/2/67. Unreferenced newspaper clipping featuring a letter to the Earl of Derby entitled "Thanks of the Prince Regent to the Manchester Magistrates and Yeomanry" signed off by Lord Sidmouth less than a week after the demonstration was put down (21 August 1819).

March 1820.[13] Five of the defendants, Henry Hunt, Samuel Bamford, Joseph Healey, John Knight and Joseph Johnson, were sentenced to between one and two years in prison for their involvement in the meeting.[14]

Commemorating Peterloo in Britain and France

The Peterloo massacre has received renewed attention in the context of the bicentenary commemorations in 2019. A memorial was fought for by the Peterloo Memorial Campaign, and eventually commissioned by Manchester City Council from the artist Jeremy Deller.[15] A number of public and academic events were held both in Manchester and across Britain to contribute to bringing the repression of 16 August 1819 to light and informing a wider cross-section of society about what happened on that day. The ballads of the post-1815 era and of Peterloo were sung, and new songs were composed, inspired by the legacy of the struggle than the men and women of Lancashire engaged in, and ultimately suffered for.[16] A graphic novel was created, the result of a partnership between cartoonist Polyp, script writer Eva Schlunke and historian Robert Poole, and film director and native of Manchester, Mike Leigh, made a feature-length film about the events which was released in 2018.[17] These commemorative actions often

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[13] See *The trial of Henry Hunt, John Knight, Joseph Johnson, John Thacker Saxton, Samuel Bamford, Joseph Healey, James Moorhouse, Robert Jones, George Swift, and Robert Wilde, for an alleged conspiracy, to alter the law by force and threats; and for convening and attending an illegal, riotous, and tumultuous meeting at Manchester, on Monday the 16th of August, 1819: before Mr. Justice Bayley, and a special jury, at York, on the 16th of March, 1820, and ten following days [...]* (Manchester: T. J. Evans, 1820).

[14] Samuel Bamford notes the reason for their conviction as "assembling with unlawful banners, an unlawful assembly, for the purpose of moving and inciting the liege subjects of our sovereign lord the king, to contempt and hatred of the government and constitution of the realm, as by law established, and attending at the same." *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, 265.

[15] Fabrice Bensimon and Katrina Navickas both engage with the debate over the Peterloo memorial campaign in their contributions to this collection.

[16] An interview conducted by Alexandra Sippel with Boff Whalley, a member of the Commoner's Choir whose singers carried the Skelmanthorpe flag to Manchester and used the banner's words to compose a variation of its verse as part of the bicentenary commemorations in 2019, can be found in the *Detours* section of this collection.

[17] Polyp, Eva Schlunke, Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witnesses to a Massacre* (Oxford: New Internationalist, 2019).

intersected with the ongoing work of historians and specialists of this era to excavate the history of popular radicalism and reactions to it and bring new aspects to the fore.

In France, scholars working on this period of British history have also sought to draw attention to the Peterloo massacre in classes, seminars, media coverage and academic publications. The groundwork for this particular volume was done at two conferences organised at the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès in 2020 and 2021 which most of the contributors attended or presented papers at.[18] The first of these events, held on 6 March 2020, formed part of a set of actions and publications during the Peterloo bicentenary year which sought to raise awareness of this relatively overlooked episode of British history among a French-speaking audience.[19] The conference included a showing of Mike Leigh's film *Peterloo* (2018), as well as papers by Fabrice Bensimon, Helen Goethals and Alexandra Sippel. The second conference was held online on 5 March 2021, during the Covid pandemic, and provided the opportunity to engage in discussion with invited speakers surrounding the aftermath of Peterloo and the exact nature and extent of the 'crisis' in Britain, Ireland and the wider European and colonial world, in the year following the massacre. We were honoured to be able to welcome to Toulouse, at least virtually, Professor Robert Poole, author of *Peterloo: The English Uprising* (Oxford University Press, 2019), who provided insight into the plans afoot for uprisings in the north of England and in Scotland in the murky months which followed the massacre in Manchester, a period hitherto neglected in accounts of the period. His article in this volume, drawing upon meticulous detective work in the Home Office

[18] "Peterloo, l'histoire d'un espoir, le mémoire d'un massacre dans l'Angleterre de 1819" (6 March 2020) and "1820: Perspectives on a Year of Crisis in Britain and Ireland" (5 March 2021). The editors would like to thank the research centre CAS EA801 at Toulouse Jean Jaurès University, for the financial and administrative support provided in the organisation of both of these events.

[19] A showing of Mike Leigh's film was put on at the Sorbonne in Paris on 29 January 2020, an event supported by *La Société d'histoire de la révolution de 1848* and the *Centre d'histoire du XIXe siècle*. Articles on the subject written by Fabrice Bensimon also appeared in two French journals, *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, and *L'Histoire*, while Marion Leclair, of the University of Artois, wrote an article on the memory of the massacre, entitled "Les fantômes de Peterloo" which appeared in the October 2019 edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. A French translation of Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical* by Laurent Bury was edited by Fabrice Bensimon and, with the contribution of Robert Poole, published under the title of *La Vie d'un radical anglais au temps de Peterloo* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 2019).

archives, develops the issues presented in that paper, and provides a rich and detailed account of the possibilities of a coordinated uprising in the outlying provinces, far from the capital, in the months after the events.

The 2021 conference was framed as a homage to professor of social history at the University of Leeds, Malcolm Chase, whose death in late February 2020 cast a shadow over the first conference, and whose work on 1820 profoundly influenced the second. We were deeply moved by the presence of Malcolm Chase's family at our online conference in March 2021. Malcolm had generously accepted our invitation to speak at a symposium organised in Toulouse in 2014 to mark the bicentenary of the death of radical land reformer Thomas Spence, who had featured prominently in his book *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840,* first published in 1988.[20] Those of us present at that conference, like those who knew him and worked with him closely, were able to grasp at first hand the special place he occupied in scholarship of the nineteenth century and his particular talents as a historian. We got a sense of his generosity, his warmth and his knowledge as well as his deft skill at bringing little-known lives into view and providing deep insight into how working families experienced the times they lived through in periods of often rapid and dislocating change. His craft was also in the detail. The past is given texture in Malcolm Chase's work through his ability to pair incisive political and economic insight with history on a human scale. These are qualities that have been widely acknowledged, and that transcended borders, as this volume is testimony to. Fabrice Bensimon, who gave a tribute to Malcolm Chase at the first conference in March 2020, along with his co-author Rohan McWilliam, kindly agreed for the obituary of Malcolm Chase, that they wrote and published in the Autumn 2021 issue of *History Workshop Journal*, to be translated into French by Amélie Josselin-Leray and included here in this collection.[21] We hope that French-speaking readers will, through this particular piece, and through the collection of articles as a whole, many of which engage closely with Malcolm Chase's work, be able to gain an understanding of his contribution to the political and social history of Britain in the nineteenth century.

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[20] Malcolm Chase, "“The Real Rights of Man”: Thomas Spence, Paine and Chartism," *Miranda* [Online], 13 | 2016, Online since 17 November 2016; DOI: https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8989.

[21] Bensimon, Fabrice, Rohan McWilliam, "Malcolm Chase (1957–2020)," *History Workshop Journal* 92 (Autumn 2021): 272–281, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbab028. Amélie Josselin-Leray's translation of this obituary is published as a postscript to this volume.

Malcolm Chase, *1820 Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom*

In *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom*, Malcolm Chase opens with the contention that "Peterloo has long defined the years following 1815. As much as the 1832 Reform Act, it was the milestone to which radicals (working and middle class alike) would later refer in asserting the moral bankruptcy of aristocratic government."[22] Yet the author goes on to suggest that it was during the year which followed the massacre in Manchester–one characterised by a deep economic recession–that the greatest challenges were faced by the ruling Tory government. Those challenges, in his view, came not from the official parliamentary opposition, the Whigs, but from outside Parliament, across the four nations of Britain and Ireland. Chase relates the year 1820 through the eyes of those who lived through it, from its bitterly cold opening weeks, through the death of George III in January, the unravelling of the plot to assassinate Lord Liverpool's cabinet in February that year, the trials of the St. Peter's Field organisers in York in March, and the groundswell of resistance in the West of Ireland, in Clydeside in Scotland and in the West Riding of Yorkshire in April, through to its close, characterised by widespread support for the king's estranged wife, Queen Caroline, who had returned to Britain in June to a carnavalesque reception and managed to unite different strands of opposition to the new king George IV's Tory ministry.

Events and people's preoccupations are recounted as the year unfolds, to the cadence of the seasons, following the calendar year in chapters entitled "winter's end," "Easter risings," "late spring and early summer" and "autumn," reaching the conclusion with "November's illuminations seen by winter's cold light." It is a captivating and intimate portrait of how people–from weavers to ministers–lived and saw their world throughout 1820, in which the author knits together affairs of state, ministerial anxiety and the prevailing climate of discontent across Ireland and Britain with the intricate details of people's private lives–conveyed through diary entries, letters, secret memos and carefully chosen extracts from vast archival deposits. Against the backdrop of economic dislocation, we learn about William and Mary Varley, handloom weavers working just outside Manchester in the hamlet of Higham, what they ate, how they heated their home, what worried them, and what they thought of the times they lived through. The death of

[22] Chase, Malcolm, *1820: Disorder and Stability in the United Kingdom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 1.